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# ON WORK AND ALIENATION\*

## *American Sociological Association, 1985 Presidential Address*

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These meetings are devoted in large part to the nature of work, and the contribution I would like to make to the discussions that will occupy us for the rest of the week has to do with work and alienation. I do not plan here to report on a completed piece of research or to argue for any particular way of doing sociological work on the subject. I hope, rather, to engage in the kind of aerial reconnaissance most of us try to undertake before we move on foot into a new research terrain. That means that I cannot help but be more attentive to the broader contours of that terrain than to its finer grains and textures.

My remarks are in three parts. First, a sketchy review of Karl Marx's views on the nature of human alienation. Second, a few thoughts on alienation in the increasingly automated workplaces of today. And third, a note of vaguely methodological intent on how one can know when one is in the presence of alienation.

### I

Modern workers, we have heard from a number of quarters, are alienated, emptied of much of their natural creativity and humanity as a result of the conditions under which they work. The very notion is so closely identified with the work of Karl Marx that one is almost required to begin a reconnaissance with him. I do not intend to become involved in a close reading of Marx here, but it may be useful (to borrow a wonderful image from Jaroslav Pelikan) to pass a magnet lightly across Marx's writings on alienation in the hope of drawing out from it those scraps of metal, those filings, that are of special value to a present-day sociology of work.

Human beings, says Marx, are, quite literally, made for work. This is not because we are doomed to toil as a result of the Fall

("Cursed is the ground for thy sake . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread"), but, on the contrary, because working is in our bones, in the very tissues of our being. The human animal emerged as a species from an environment in which laboring already played a prominent evolutionary part, and to that extent humankind is shaped by work, molded by it. The human hand, the human eye, the human brain have all evolved in response to the nature of work, and so, of course, have the human nervous system and the human imagination. Hannah Adrendt (1958:86) called this "the seemingly blasphemous notion of Marx that labor (and not God) created man or that labor (and not reason) distinguish man from other animals."

Human beings reach out, gather the materials of nature, and fashion them into objects of one kind or another. We collect an armful of wood, pick up a piece of flint, extract a stone from a quarry—or, for that matter, capture a sight or a sound that happens to move us. The true character of humankind is reflected in the objects we produce as a result of that process—a campfire, an axe, a cathedral, a sonnet. Work of that kind is necessary for humans to fulfill their true nature. That is how, Marx said, they "develop" their "slumbering powers" ([1906] 1967:177). Now the energy and skill invested in the object is the very stuff of the person who created it, a part of his life's blood. And in a very real sense, then, he sees himself, evaluates himself, measures himself—even knows himself—by the things he makes. He "sees his own reflection in a world which he has constructed," Marx put it (1964:128). The producer, then, and the thing he produces, are of the same flesh. Or at least that is the way nature intended it to be.

In the age of industrialization and capitalism, however, three developments have conspired to disturb that natural arrangement.

The first is the institution of private property. Both the means by which objects are produced and the objects themselves are owned by somebody else in a functioning capitalist system, with the result that the worker is drawn apart from the work itself. They are of a flesh, the worker and the work, but that flesh is severed by the cruel wedge of private ownership.

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I owe a deep debt to the generosity of Marvin Bressler, Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, William Form, Richard H. Hall, David Montgomery, and my fellow students in Sociology 510. I have more than the usual reasons for wanting to make clear that I alone am to blame for errors of fact, tone, and imagination.

The second is the development of a more and more complex division of labor. Workers play an increasingly reduced role when a task is broken up into minute segments; they apply but a fraction of their skill and knowledge to the task at hand, and often lose their sense of the larger logic of the productive process in the bargain.

The third is the process by which human labor becomes a commodity like all other commodities. Workers in a capitalist economy do not ordinarily manufacture things for their own consumption, nor, presumably, do they do so for the joy of it. They manufacture things for money, for cold tender. Their experience and ability—their very selves, in fact—are sold at market prices in much the same way as a side of beef or a sack of potatoes, and in that sense they become commodities themselves. They are objects, things of a measured worth, without any greater value than the denomination of the coin used to purchase them.

Alienation, then, is disconnection, separation—the process by which human beings are cut adrift from their natural moorings in the world as the result of unnatural, alien work arrangements. It can take a number of forms.

For one thing, people can be said to be alienated when they lose contact with the product of their own labor. The things people fashion become an extension of their persons, a part of themselves, because they have breathed life into them. In the process of shaping a bowl or working a piece of leather or stitching a garment, they have poured some of themselves into it—a portion of their inventiveness, energy, humanity. And when the objects they have created are taken away to be stored in someone else's warehouse or sold on someone else's terms, the qualities they had invested in those objects are simply lost to them. They are reduced in stature, diminished in spirit. And as this raid on their personalities is repeated every day of their working lives, they become more and more incomplete human beings, facing life with dulled moral reflexes, blurred perceptions, and an impaired ability to think matters through.

For another thing, people can be said to be alienated when they lose their involvement in the activity of working itself and no longer experience it as a meaningful act of creation. This can happen, for example, when a worker feels dominated by the machinery with which she works. It can happen when the work of the hand is separated from the work of the brain—when the rhythms of a particular set of tasks are choreographed by a planner in some distant office and carried out with wooden compliance by workers on the shop floor. It

can happen when a person's working hours are sharply differentiated from the other hours of the daily round: most modern workers can draw the line between the hours that belong to work and the hours that belong to them with a fierce precision, punching in and punching out on the dot of the minute. And it can happen, finally, when a person comes to see work as a means to an end, as an instrumentality. It does not nourish the worker's spirit but depletes it, and he becomes like a machine, senselessly grinding out something for the food it will bring to his table. "From being a man," said Marx somewhat starchy, "he becomes merely an abstract activity and a belly" (1964:72).

People can also be said to be alienated when they become estranged from their fellow creatures, which, says Marx, is inevitable in capitalism. Being commodities for sale, people are always in competition with one another, and that understandably helps reduce whatever feelings of comradeship and communality might otherwise emerge. Workers tend to be so brutalized and depleted by the experience of work, moreover, that they are largely incapable of authentic relations with others anyway.

And, finally, people can be said to be alienated when they find themselves separated from their own nature as members of the human species. Since they are not engaged in creating life but merely earning the wherewithal to stay alive, they are no longer an active part of nature, no longer participants in its rhythms. They are, then, less than human, alienated even from themselves. That thought has always had a good deal of appeal to critics like Erich Fromm who want to talk about the existential crisis of modern times, but we can, however, afford to leave it behind us with the observation that, whatever its other virtues, our magnet will not draw from it many scraps of the sort we need for a venture into the field.

So all of the methods devised under capitalism to increase production, said Marx with a fine flourish

mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process . . . [and] subject him during the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his lifetime into a working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital . . . (1906:708)

Thus the views of Karl Marx on alienation—or a version of them anyway. Now suppose for a moment that we were to take

those views with us into the new research terrain and use them to inform our inquiry. From what regions of the modern workplace should we most expect alienation to emerge? Where should we look for those sensitive zones in the structure of work that seem most capable of inducing it?

Marx would brief us, presumably, by saying that alienation is most likely to issue from those locations in the workplace (a) where workers are separated both from the products of their labor and from the means of production, (b) where people contributing to the overall production process do not have a very clear sense of the pattern of the whole and are not really sure what their own role is in it, (c) where the work process is controlled by an external force or condition to which the worker has to adapt her own movements, and (d) where the work task has been splintered into so many specialties that only a fraction of the worker's intelligence and skill is required for its completion.

The first of those considerations has a rather antique sound in this day and age. Workers in industrialized countries everywhere have lost whatever claim they might otherwise have had to the product of their own labor, even if we knew what "product" meant in an economy increasingly devoted to service; and few persons can be said to own the means of production—except in the somewhat remote sense that they are among "the people" in whose name the title has been drawn up. We are really speaking now about the human condition in modern times, a matter outside our present ken.

The key sources of alienation, then, from this point of view, reduce to two—first, those structures in the modern workplace that subdivide labor into narrower and narrower specialties, and, second, those structures in the modern workplace that limit the amount of control workers exercise over the work they do. Those sources, as we shall soon see, have been discussed at some length in the literature.

## II

To the extent that Marx's observations were meant to serve as notes on the history of capitalism, he was asking us to envision a transformation from the gentler rhythms and more intimate scales of the artisanal past to the clatter and brutality of the industrial present. It is a story of the ways in which a system of production based on craft is replaced by a system of production based on a finely calibrated division of labor.

If we were to try to portray that transformation as drama, our first scene would almost

have to take place in a craft workshop, where a cobbler or spinner or barrel maker fashions an object, invests something of himself in it, and either figuratively or literally leaves his signature on it; and our last scene would almost have to take place in a modern factory, especially one engaged in line assembly. Those are the images, after all, around which most of us organize our sense of that critical passage. The song of the craftsman would be drawn from such testimony as this (Sturt, 1923:78):

But no higher wage, no income, will buy for men that satisfaction which of old—until machinery made drudges of them—streamed into their muscles all day long from close contact with iron, timber, clay, wind and wave, horse-strength. It tingled up in the niceties of touch, sight, scent. The very ears unawares received it, as when the plane went singing over the wood, or the exact chisel went tapping in (under the mallet) to the hard ash with gentle sound. But these intimacies are now over. Although they have much for leisure men can now taste little solace in life, of the sort that skilled handwork used to yield to them . . . In what was once the wheelwright's shop, where Englishmen grew friendly with the grain of timber and with sharp tool, nowadays youths wait upon machines . . .

And the song of the factory operative would be drawn from any of the hundreds of interviews that abound in contemporary social studies. "God, I hated that assembly line," a mechanic says to Lillian Breslow Rubin (1976:155),

I hated it. I used to fall asleep on the job standing up and still keep doing my work. There's nothing more boring and more repetitious in the world. On top of it, you don't feel human. The machine's running you, you're not running it.

And another operative says to Charles Walker and Robert Guest (1952:54):

The assembly line is no place to work, I can tell you. There is nothing more discouraging than having a barrel beside you with 10,000 bolts in it and using them all up. Then you get a barrel with another 10,000 bolts, and you know every one of those 10,000 bolts has to be picked up and put in exactly the same place as the last 10,000 bolts.

The problem with that way of portraying the transformation is that the craft workshop and the assembly line can hardly be understood as anything more than symbols. To speak of handicrafts in the preindustrial age is to speak of the economy of the towns and the occupations of a select few, not of the vast stretches



of farmland in which 90 percent of the population scratched out a living. To speak of the assembly line in our own time is to speak of a rather uncommon form of manufacture. For all the celebrity of the automobile industry among social scientists, a decreasing number of workers are involved in manufacturing of any kind, and even at its moment of special glory, no more than 5 percent or so of manual workers in the United States were engaged in line assembly. Nor can we take for granted that even that minority has been as abused by the ways of the workplace as is commonly supposed (Form 1973, 1976). The world we have lost is a world of agriculture; the world we are in the process of becoming is a world in which manufacture is yielding to service and both are becoming automated.

It is hard to know how to speak of the toil of the peasant when our subject is alienation. It is a form of craft work, to be sure, involving an intimate association with tools and materials, and to the extent that one extracts a living from the land one works, one can be said to be retaining at least a portion of the product of one's labor. There is personality in a good thatch, presumably, craft in a well-fashioned harness, art in a clean furrow. Ferdinand Toennies (1963:164) thought:

The *Gemeinschaft*, to the extent that it is capable of doing so, transforms all repulsive labor into a kind of art, giving it style, dignity, and charm, and a rank in its order, denoted as a calling and an honor.

But how many peasants, gnarled and leathery and bent to the hoe after decades in the fields, knew of that charm and honor? Somehow we need a different conceptual vocabulary than the one from which the term "alienation" comes to deal with the preindustrial countryside.

It is also hard to know how to speak about alienation as workers leave the satanic mills and move into the automated workplaces of our own period. There have been many expressions of hope in the last two or three decades that the coming of automation would reduce the amount of alienation in the modern workplace by replacing labor of the most mechanical and mindless kind with activities that require skill, judgment, and a sense of craft. Workers in charge of automated equipment, so the argument goes, rely on quick intelligence and sure perceptions rather than on brute strength, are freed from the unrelenting rhythms of a machine, can wander around the larger workplace and develop some feeling for what the whole enterprise is about, and, in general, escape from the pinched and narrow niches into which a complicated division of

labor would otherwise have confined them. These expressions of hope have been nourished by just enough empirical evidence to make it one of the more important hypotheses under consideration in the sociology of work (see, for example, Bell, 1973; Blauner, 1964; Shepard, 1971).

There is a contrary position, however, also nourished by enough data to protect its standing in the field. For if it is reasonable to point out, as Blauner and others have, that the division of labor is likely to become less problematic in automated work settings because more aspects of the productive process are gathered into a single set of hands, then it is also reasonable to note that automation may have a pronounced capacity for sharpening other aggravations in the workplace that appear to induce alienation (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Glenn and Feldberg, 1977; Feldberg and Glenn, 1983; Noble, 1984; Wallace and Kal-leberg, 1982). Let me review some of those reasons.

In the first place, the skill called for in most automated procedures is really a deftness of hand, a sureness of eye, a quickness of reflex—not the mastery of materials and the maturity of judgment that was once the meaning of the word "craft".

In the second place, information moves both back and forth along the circuits of a computer. They send programmed instructions out to the shop floor or the office, and, at the same time, they bring intelligence back. In the process, they have the capacity to drain the craftsman of what may well have been his most important lever of control—the wisdom and lore that comes from years of experience. "Any self-respecting machinist," says Harley Shaiken (1984:54), "has a legendary 'black book' that records the problems encountered and the shortcuts discovered on previous jobs." It is a special kind of knowledge, "enriched over time". Computers, too, however, can store such experience, and they can do so for every craftsman for miles around. The computer's own black book, then, can soon contain the lore from tens of thousands of minds, and as all that information is sorted out, experience becomes a matter of formula, intuition and judgment become matters of computation. It might even be claimed—although I am not sure I am doing so now—that the computer's black book does for human beings what genetic codes do for social insects: give creatures the accumulated experience of generations without asking from them so much as a trace of thought.

In the third place, for both of the reasons just mentioned, the work of the hand and the work of the brain can be even more profoundly divorced in automated work settings. If the goal

of the old Scientific Management movement was to control the muscle activity of the worker from the distant removes of the front office, to eliminate flourish and personality and lazy rhythms from the doing of everyday tasks, then the computer can be its perfect instrument. For the computer can program not only the behavior of the machine, but in a very real sense, the behavior of those whose job it is to monitor it.

In the fourth place, the work required in automated settings, though largely free of muscular exertion, can replace the boredom that comes from endlessly repeating the same rote activity with the boredom that comes from doing almost nothing at all. Now that may be something of a blessing, to be sure. "When the machine is working," said one operative happily. "I am not." His job is to attend the machine, to be at its service. He is, as David Halle (1984) puts it, "on guard duty". But monitoring the workings of some machine can be profoundly boring, when things go right, which is most of the time; and if the worker finds other things to occupy her time—reading, musing, telling tales—the activity itself is wholly alien to the meaning of work.

In the fifth place, automation can have an enormous impact on the way individuals relate to the machinery with which they work. People have been operating machines since the beginning of the industrial era, of course, and under the right circumstances the largest of them is like a hand tool, an extension of the person. It clearly makes a huge difference, however, in the almost organic relationship between person and machine whether you master it or it masters you. When the machine is yours to command, you turn it on and thereby give it life; you adjust it and thereby make it an extension of your hand. But when it turns itself on and has its own self-correcting mechanisms and even knows when to slow down, it is like a willful creature with its own motives whom you must serve.

In the sixth place, if it is important to people to be in touch with the materials they use in their work—to feel the grain of the wood, the texture of the leather, the weave of the fabric—then it should be noted that those who work with automated procedures are about as distant from the materials they are shaping as it is possible to be. In continuous process plants, for instance, it is not at all uncommon for a worker to never see or touch the raw materials that come in one end of the cycle and never see or touch the finished products that come out the other.

In the seventh place, the kinds of continuous process that automation make possible create an entirely different kind of work day for a

large portion of the labor force. The rest of the social world—the world of schools and shops and churches, of team sports and communal entertainments—is on the day shift. For most people, the day is the natural time to work, the night to sleep. The worker who must organize her activities around some other pattern is cut off, then, not only from the rhythms of family and the rhythms of community but from what often feels like the rhythms of nature itself.

In the last and most important place, the potential for control over the worker and the workplace is hugely enlarged in automated settings. This is true not only in the sense that automated procedures offer a means for superintending almost everything that happens in the office and on the shop floor, but also in the sense that they make possible a remarkably efficient system of surveillance of everyone out there. Workers can be trained to keep an eye on automated equipment and watch out for the signs of trouble, but, as I noted a moment ago, the equipment, in its turn, can be trained to keep an eye on those who tend it just as easily. All those panels and gauges and screens, by means of which an employee can monitor the functioning of the equipment, have the ability to stare back—to monitor one's activities, measure one's output, almost follow one around.

If the grinding pace of the assembly line, say, makes one into a kind of motor, a torpid technical instrument, so, too, can supervision. At its rawest, in fact, supervision *is* a kind of automation, if only in the sense that when it is too mechanical, too automatic, too relentless, it becomes machine-like. Harry Braverman complains that clerical workers are too often

subjected to routines, more or less mechanized according to current possibilities, that strip them of their former grasp of even a limited amount of office information, divest them of the need or ability to understand and decide, and make of them so many mechanical eyes, fingers, and voices whose functioning is, insofar as possible, predetermined by both rules and machinery. (1974:340)

The dominion of the machinery to which Braverman refers has been remarked any number of times, the dominion of the rules less often. Yet workers who are pressed in on all sides by quotas, indices, routines, and all those forms of monitoring that managers can turn to when they are under pressure themselves, are, for all practical purposes, being exposed to a species of automation. So it scarcely ranks as good news to those who work at the non-management level that the number of super-

visors seems to be growing at a much faster rate throughout the labor force than other employees.

The aerial reconnaissance I mentioned earlier—in my own case a study of workers in the communications industry<sup>1</sup>—suggests that supervision may be a key element here, and there are quite a few studies in the literature, the work of Melvin L. Kohn and his associates being prominent among them, that alert us to expect as much (Kohn, 1976, 1985; Kohn and Schooler, 1973, 1978, 1982, 1983; Mortimer and Lorence, 1979; Mottaz, 1981; Walsh, 1982).

There is no easy answer, then, to the question as to whether automation serves to restrict the range of a worker's skill and autonomy or serves to free him from the old tyrannies of work (for a balanced view see Form, 1981; Spenner, 1979, 1983). There is every reason to suppose, however, that the effects of automation are spread very unevenly throughout the workplace, not only from industry to industry or from occupation to occupation, but from one work station to another.

### III

I have been trying to review here some of the structural conditions of the modern workplace that may be especially productive of alienation. But in order for that to be a useful contribution to the sociology of work, we need to consider another matter. Where does alienation reside? How does one know when one is in its presence? That is a tougher question than might appear on the surface, because so many different currents of thought have converged on it from so many different ideological directions.

Joachim Israel (1971) distinguishes between "estranging processes"—those conditions in the structure of the workplace that induce alination—and "states of estrangement"—those psychological dispositions that result. I have been speaking more or less of the former; I am turning now—more or less—to the latter.

There are those who argue that one ought to be able to determine when a person is alienated by taking a look at the objective conditions in which she works. The worker exposed to estranging conditions is alienated almost by definition, no matter what she says she thinks or even what she thinks she thinks. Harry Braverman, for example, would accuse us of doing the work of the personnel administrator

if we dealt with "the reaction of the worker" rather than with the nature of the work (1974:29), by which he means, apparently, that certain forms of work can be understood as alienating no matter how that fact is registered in the person of the worker. That view, whatever else one might want to say about it, has the effect of closing off sociological investigation rather than the effect of inviting it. Alienation, in order to make empirical sense, has to reside somewhere in or around the persons who are said to experience it.

Yet it sounds rather naive to assume, as many sociologists have, that a state like alienation can be discerned by so simple a procedure as asking people about their degree of job satisfaction—which is essentially what Blauner, for all the other riches of his analysis, actually did. People can think themselves satisfied by work that degrades them in countless ways, and, of course, they can grumble incessantly about work that would appear on the fact of it to be enhancing. Michel Crozier (1971), for instance, discovered in his study of Parisian office workers that the employees who expressed the most interest in their work were often the ones who complained the most about it, an observation others have made as well; and in general, there are many reasons to suppose that the relationship between expressions of satisfaction and the facts of the work day is, to say the least, an inexact one (see, for example, Kahn, 1972).

Robert Blauner and Harry Braverman, as a matter of fact, mark the two poles very well. Virtually all of Blauner's data come from surveys on job satisfaction conducted by Elmo Roper, while Braverman has no data at all on the way workers feel about work, how they experience it, or what it does to them.

So we need something in between. The concept "alienation," let's say, has a limited number of uses for sociology unless it refers to a condition that is registered somewhere in the person's mind or spirit or body, and is reflected in actual behavior. On the face of it, at least, that would seem like easily defended ground, but in fact it cuts off friends on both ends of the conceptual continuum. On the one hand, we have to jettison the idea that situations rich in the kinds of detail that appear degrading by some external standard or another can be assumed to generate alienation. That must be shown, not taken as given. Otherwise we would be in much the same logical position as a physician prepared to diagnose malaria on hearing the news that someone passed through an especially virulent swamp. On the other hand, we have to jettison a lot of what we think we have learned from surveys, for we dare not assume that the effects of alienation are readily apparent

<sup>1</sup> The project has as its working title "The Culture of the Workplace". Cynthia Fuchs Epstein and I serve as principle investigators. Support has been provided by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation.

even to those who experience it. The kinds of questions we ask in the usual survey on job satisfaction would seem like rather frail instruments for probing into all those layers of emotional scar tissue which, if Marx is even half right, can be formed over the injuries of work. Melvin L. Kohn is surely right to suggest, as he has in these very meetings (1985), that the objective character of the work must be matched with a discernable condition in the person for a connection to be assumed between the two.

If alienation is a state of being, it does not reside in the workplace alone but in the whole of one's existence. That raises another matter: how do the degradations of the workplace bleed into the larger fabric of a person's life? There have been any number of conversations in sociological circles about the degree to which work experience "spills over" into other spheres of life, and the degree to which non-work activities compensate for whatever dissatisfactions are generated at work. We do not need to review those conversations now, but it may be worth noting that while the structures of modern life make it easy to distinguish between the world of work and the world of leisure, the structures of the human mind do not operate in the same way. The moods of the workplace are carried across the threshold into the household, and, of course, the moods of the household are carried back, and the ways in which the two are played off in the organization of a person's life is a critical part of the larger puzzle.

Looking at the larger whole of human life, then, there are many forms of behavior that might alert an observer to the possibility that alienation is lurking somewhere below the surface. One can begin, as sociologists traditionally have, with the standard indices of dissatisfaction: calling in sick, filing grievances, and quitting altogether have long been regarded as hidden votes on the quality of work life, and most of the available data seem to indicate that such votes are cast far more often in the kinds of work setting that can reasonably be described as alienating. One can try to assess the long-range effects of various working conditions on the personalities of those exposed to them, as Kohn and his associates have been doing for years. Then one can attend to the things people do—and the things that happen to them—outside the immediate precincts of work: we have every reason in the world to think, for example, that taking drugs and drinking too much and sinking into a kind of numbed depression are correlated with alienating work conditions.

All of which raises a darker point as I bring these remarks to a close. We have to assume,

as we noted a moment ago, that alienated work leaves some sort of mark on the persons affected by it, and that those marks are at least in principle detectable by the right kind of geiger counter. We also have to assume—this too is repetition—that the persons so marked are not usually the ones best equipped to understand what has happened to them. Indeed, it is one of Marx's major contributions to our thinking that lack of insight into one's true condition is *itself* a consequence of alienation. The condition furnishes its own camouflage.

We are then engaged in a haughty business, for we are declaring for all practical purposes that trained and thoughtful observers can see traces in the conduct of fellow human beings of something they are not aware of, and, in fact, *cannot* be aware of. That prospect did not bother Marx for one moment. His language crackles with feeling when he describes what he thinks the capitalist mode of production has done to the workers exposed to it. It "mortifies his body and ruins his mind," said he, leaving "idiocy" and "cretinism" in its wake. It makes of the worker "a crippled monstrosity"—"mutilated," "degraded," "stunted," "broken," "emasculated," "stupified," "debased".

Now that is a sharp diagnosis by any standard, and I, for one, would not relish the thought of moving out onto a shop floor somewhere to ask strapping workers about their stupification and idiocy. But there may be an important world to be discovered there as soon as we learn to ask the right questions about it. The work of Melvin Seeman in particular gives us a secure place to stand when we consider the anatomy of alienation (see 1959, 1972, 1975, and 1983 in particular). But being raised now is the question of what it does to the human spirit in others ways. Do the conditions that Marx encouraged us to think of as alienating add in any appreciable way to the sum of human indifference, brutality, exhaustion, cruelty, numbness? Is there any relationship between alienation and the passion with which capital punishment is promoted, insults to national honor resented, people of other kinds demeaned? I have no idea. I only know that such questions are important, sympathetic, and, in principle answerable.

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